

STEP RIGHT UP TO THE SOLOMONS

by Richard H. Chesher



Somewhere, lost in the Pacific sky, drifting on contrails of smoke and heat, a small knot of travelers awaits arrival in the Solomon Islands. A drifting, lightheaded sensation, a change in pitch of the jets and everyone is aware the islands are near. Below, through weather-streaked windows, beyond a luminous rainbow which strides from cloud mountain to cloud mountain, appears a dark shape, lined with thin white surf. Is it Guadalcanal?

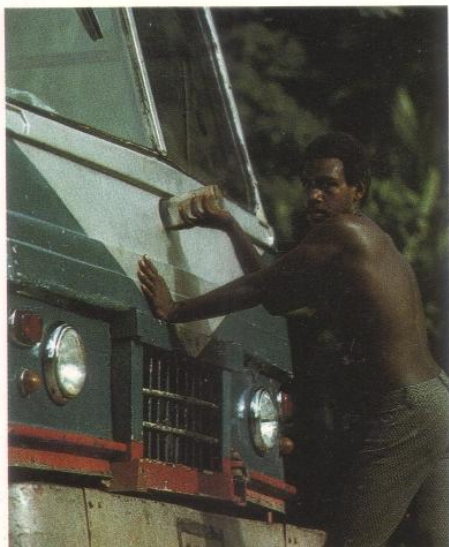
The small map in the seat pocket shows a long double chain of islands stretching southeast from Papua New Guinea for almost a thousand miles. Six big islands and sixteen smaller island groups; archipelagos within an archipelago. Soaring volcanoes, flat coral atolls, mangrove islands, man-made islands. Coconut plantations, rain

forests, clear mountain streams with huge fresh-water prawns dashing from log to log. Prismatic dancing rainbows on white sand beneath the silvered surface of clear oceanic water. Rolling surf on weathered coral rock, a coruscating display of tropical fishes dancing in mystic understanding of the coral towers. An image of golden domed cowry shells and Glory-of-the-Sea cones bursts with the slight jolt that announces arrival at Henderson Airport at Honiara, the capital of the Solomons. The hypnotic reverie dissipates completely in the hot, dusty reality of the tiny airport with its custom officials and taxicabs and its urgent message to move on.

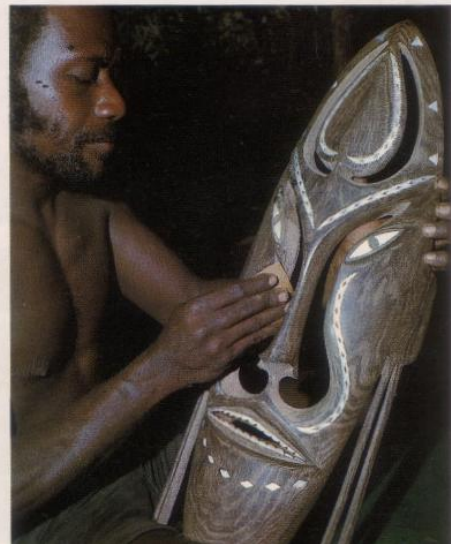
And does not return until I am comfortably seated at a small open-air table at Point Cruz Yacht Club, right next to the Mendana Hotel.

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SOLOMON SCENES: Malaita dancers wield totemic birds during a custom war dance (below); the "sometimes " bus system near Auki on Malaita (bottom left); a smallgirl plays in her dug-out canoe at Buruku, Rendova,



POLYNESIAN DANCERS from Bellona enact the dangerous canoe journey which brought them to their island (below); fishermen at Buruku, Rendova, make a haul of small fish (bottom left); an expert wood carver puts the finishing touches on a carved mask inlaid with nautilus shell.



VIVIDLY COLORED starfish parade on the mini jungle of animals under a coral rock at Munoa (below); an intricate feather star extends its arms in ten meters of warm, clean tropical water (bottom center left); poisonous cone shells, like the *Conus textile*, are frequently found under coral rocks, buried in the sand (bottom left); the group of hermit crabs was discovered on the beach near Munda.



SOLOMON ISLAND sea people build their houses on stilts over the sea at Kia, St. Isabel (below); shell money, like this tafuliae, is used to buy a bridge on Malaita, The 2.5 meter-long belt is made from the clam shells shown in photo (bottom left); the delicately woven thatched wall of a house is at Paradise, New Georgia.



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Here, an ice cold beer, a gentle sea breeze, the thatched roof, and the small harbor crowded with boats allows me to contemplate the day's collection of reveries. Old, brightly painted wooden boats, interisland boats named "Gudrun" and "Waisissi" and things like that rise and fall on the gentle swell of the harbor. The tall masts of two cruising sailboats sweep monotonously back and forth with each passing wave. This is a peaceful, sleepy little town, with a curious provincial British Colonial atmosphere seasoned with an eager spice of many different kinds of islanders who venture to Honiara seeking jobs, medical aid, education, or someone to buy their handcrafts.

While Honiara would be interesting for a few days, I wanted to get to the out islands where the culture is all Melanesian. There were many possibilities. Of all the hundreds of islands, over 11,000 square miles of land, of all the thousands of villages, only Honiara is subjected to any amount of tourism. And only 2,550 tourists arrived in Honiara by air in 1976. Marau Sound on the eastern tip of Guadalcanal, Auki on Malaita, Munda on New Georgia, and Gizo may be reached by the general traveler, but hardly anyone goes there. Cruise ships only stop in Honiara. And they don't even stay overnight.

The next day I wandered around the three travel agencies and visited the cultural museum. I met an islander from New Georgia and decided I liked the idea of heading out to the western Solomons, by air or by sea. Solair could fly me there in a couple of hours. The ship took twenty four hours and stopped at twelve ports on the way to Gizo. This sounded like fun and I could go "Deluxe class" for only \$27 Australian. A cabin cost \$35 but there would be plenty of time for sleep in Munda. Gizo was the district center out west. It, too, was a bit "British" while Munda was more remote and yet had a guest house for tourists. The decision was simple, I booked passage on the blue and white and rust colored interisland boat "Compass Rose II" bound from Honiara to the western Solomons. Destination Munda, heart of the wood carvers of the Solomons and the center of a most dangerous headhunter cult not long ago.

Past midnight, and utterly dark. Grey mists of rain cast a blue-green phosphorescence on the sea. Looking aft I can see a luminous comet tail of ghostly light; the propeller igniting the biological fire of untold millions of tiny creatures. Without warning, the swell of the open ocean is gone. But I can't see any islands. We should be near Vangunu; Marovo Lagoon which is a maze of reefs, islands, shoals and narrow passes. I have already learned there is no radar aboard. The lights are off in the wheelhouse so the helmsman can see. But I can't see anything yet. Suddenly, the sky is a dome of light and in the flash of lightning I can see we are steaming, full speed, within fifty meters of some trees; trees on both sides. It must be the pass into the lagoon. But how did we find it? Minutes pass as I await the heaving crash. Nothing happens. We steam on as if in broad daylight. The next flash of lightning shows we've entered into a broad, open lagoon. The lagoon is full of reefs. The boat steams on relentlessly and I see some lights ahead.

"That's nothing," says the Australian who is headed for Gizo. "They do it all the time. No, I haven't a clue how he does it. Of course, a lot of ships are driven up on reefs here. But this particular captain seems to have built-in radar in his head."

By late morning the sky was a deep velvet blue. Rendova's green volcanic peak notched the horizon. I watched the forested slopes become sharper and dearer as we approached. A rain squall was sweeping the coast of New Georgia and the smell of the sea mingled with the damp richness of the rain forest. A commotion on the stern brought my attention back to Compass Rose II. I ambled aft to find one of the islanders laughingly hauling in his fishing line. Ebony muscles straining, the line singing through the crystal blue water, everyone smiling and trying to be first to see what he had caught. Then, without a pause, the man swept a huge, quivering tuna aboard. The colors of the sea, iridescent blue, foam white and sun yellow flickered into stillness. Someone whacked the tuna with a club.

We steamed through the tiny anchorage at Buruku with carefree abandon, water boiling around the propeller as we swept up to the coral pier. Dozens of dug-out canoes were pulled up on the shore. There were two hundred people clustered at the end of the wharf. A bamboo band struck up a jazzy tune about Jesus. Everyone was laughing and singing. A wood framework at the foot of the dock was festooned with flowers and two long counters were laden with a variety of colorful objects. Before the ropes were ashore, people were leaping to the dock.

"What's all this?" I asked the Australian.

"Oh, these people have a market every week when the Compass Rose arrives. Quite a lively one. But you'd better not linger, we'll only stay here four or five minutes."

I was astonished. They set all this up for four or five minutes of activity every week? I jumped ashore and faced a character with a long black megaphone, hawking like an old pro. I couldn't catch his pidgin English but his "Step right up, folks" rhythm was clear enough. Fresh fruits, bananas,

cooked fish, puddings, straw hats, flowers and many other things. I bought some mandarin oranges and a huge papaya and spent twenty cents on an intricately woven basket to put the fruit in. The bamboo band was good. The people were a deep, lustrous black color. Their teeth were gleaming white and perfect; no betel nut chewed here. Must be a Seventh-Day Adventist village. A group of tiny children, all dressed in vivid colors, were cavorting through the forest and flower gardens, looking like a migration of butterflies in the dark green foliage. Light tan thatched houses were set back in the flowers and trees. The water off the dock was crystal clear and some naked children were leaping and screaming on a tiny, half-submerged dug-out canoe.

What a fine place, I thought. Suddenly, the ship horn blasted and within seconds, everyone was aboard and we were gone.

With mandarin oranges and the warmth of the sun, I found myself drifting off into a heavy, deep sleep under the canopy. Sounds of people talking and engines throbbing pushed me into oblivion.

I awoke to stillness. We had arrived at Munda. "Hey," I asked one of the crew members, "Aren't we going to tie up? I get off here."

"Mission no let us tie up long wharf now. We break him last year and no more can tie up long wharf," he said. He grinned as if recalling the Compass Rose reducing the pier to kindling wood and crushed coral. A dugout canoe was alongside and the man agreed to ferry me ashore. I edged over the gunwale and landed in the unbelievably unstable canoe. The man, unperturbed at my shakiness, paddled expertly ashore and I scrambled to safety. And walked to Agnes's Guest House.

The mission station was at the western end of the only road. People came from many islands and villages to attend the mission hospital. Along the road, people of various outlying areas had miniature villages to stay in while their relatives were in the hospital. They also came here to sell their carvings, to buy things in the Chinese trade stores, and so on. Past the center of Munda, with its tiny airport terminal, police station, three trade stores and guest house, the road became even more interesting. The broad path was lined with trees; the lagoon was a shimmering blue on one side, through the trees; bare-breasted women worked the flower gardens; children played.

The coral reefs of the Solomons are among the finest in the world. An incredible diversity of gaudy creatures swim, crawl, slither, or float through a multicolored forest of bizarre corals. I was one of those creatures, flipping along through the warm, clear water, absorbed in the wealth of life of the richest biological province on earth. I levered over a huge hunk of coral on the reef top and watched the whip-like arms of a brittle starfish snake through the miniature garden under the rock. Glistening cowries revealed themselves to my rummaging on the ocean floors. Shell collectors pay dearly for some of the rare shells that live in the Solomons. Golden Cowries and Glory-of-the-Sea cones are worth hundreds of dollars each. If I could find some of the really valuable ones I might pay for my entire trip. But, of course, I didn't.

"Special tourist price." The man grinned at me. At least he was honest. I wanted to buy some carvings here in the heartland of the carving district. According to the mysterious logic of the Melanesian mind, however, the prices were higher than in Honiara because I was buying directly from the artist. I was saved by the unscrupulous man who flew into Munda on his own plane to buy carvings for export.

Suddenly, carvings materialized from everywhere. People came from villages and islands in their dug-out canoes, loaded to the gunwales with carvings. A massive display of hundreds of carvings was spread out on the lawn at Agnes's Guest House. The outlandish prices labeled on some of the carvings were studiously ignored by the seasoned buyer. He grabbed boxloads of carvings for unbelievably low prices. His method of adding up the total and his rapid money shuffling and counting left the carvers looking slightly confused and a little grim. I followed him around to get an idea of what he was paying and then nabbed a beautiful ebony head with nautilus inlay and an exquisite shark with real shark teeth for a couple of dollars more than he was paying.

"Special tourist price," I said, grinning, as I handed the man the money for the shark.

The carvings reflect the totemic culture that was. Sharks, fish, turtles, crocodiles, stingrays, masks and heads. The animals represent family clans whose ancestors were able to reincarnate in the body of animals. Shark worshipers have hung on longer than most of the other cults. I later found a village where the people were still pagan.

One night I sat in the soft glow of a lantern talking with the high shark priest. "My magic has many powers in all the countries of the world," he explained. He mixed himself some betel nut and lime, hammering them together into a paste which he wrapped in a broad leaf and crammed into his mouth. After a time he turned to me. The lantern cast a glow in his blondegrey hair, his face in shadow. "I am not religion. I am pagan. Christians say 'love one another'. That's true. You go to religion and you say you love one another. Why you say love one another? I don't see you love one another."

"But I, myself I stay in pagan and I love one another. Also I do for white man as I do for ourselves. I must love and stay good with everyone," He said. He turned back to look into space, his profile peaceful, thoughtful. I found it better to say nothing. I joined him in reflection.

Later, I flew Solair back to Honiara. The scene after takeoff reminded me of a large map I once saw in a government office. In the middle of the rugged mountains, the chart said, "Wandering Pagan Tribes." As I looked at the dense forest, an unbroken green canopy of trees, I imagined Stone Age people peering up at the great silver plane. And somewhere, on the Compass Rose II, or perhaps in the jungle of New Georgia, or maybe on the coral reef, watching the grey, svelte shape of a shark circle toward me, the corners of civilization had been filed off.